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November 1993

Pilkington's prowess; Foster in Duisburg

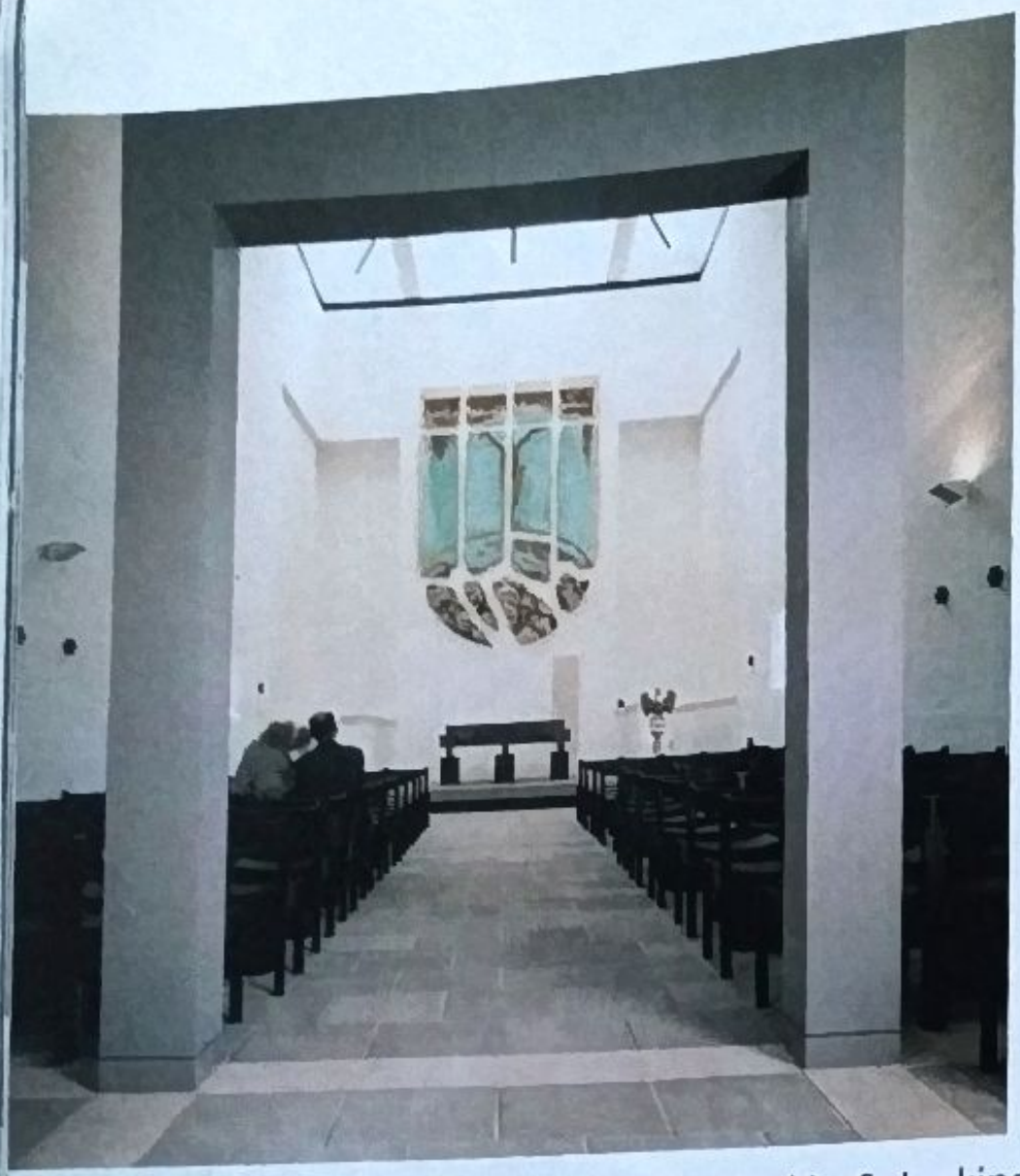
St Paul's church Haringey

Interbuild 93 guide

Manasseh on Hopkins

Inner meaning: Bennetts Assocs, Tugman Design, Shillam & Smith

Product, CAD and IT

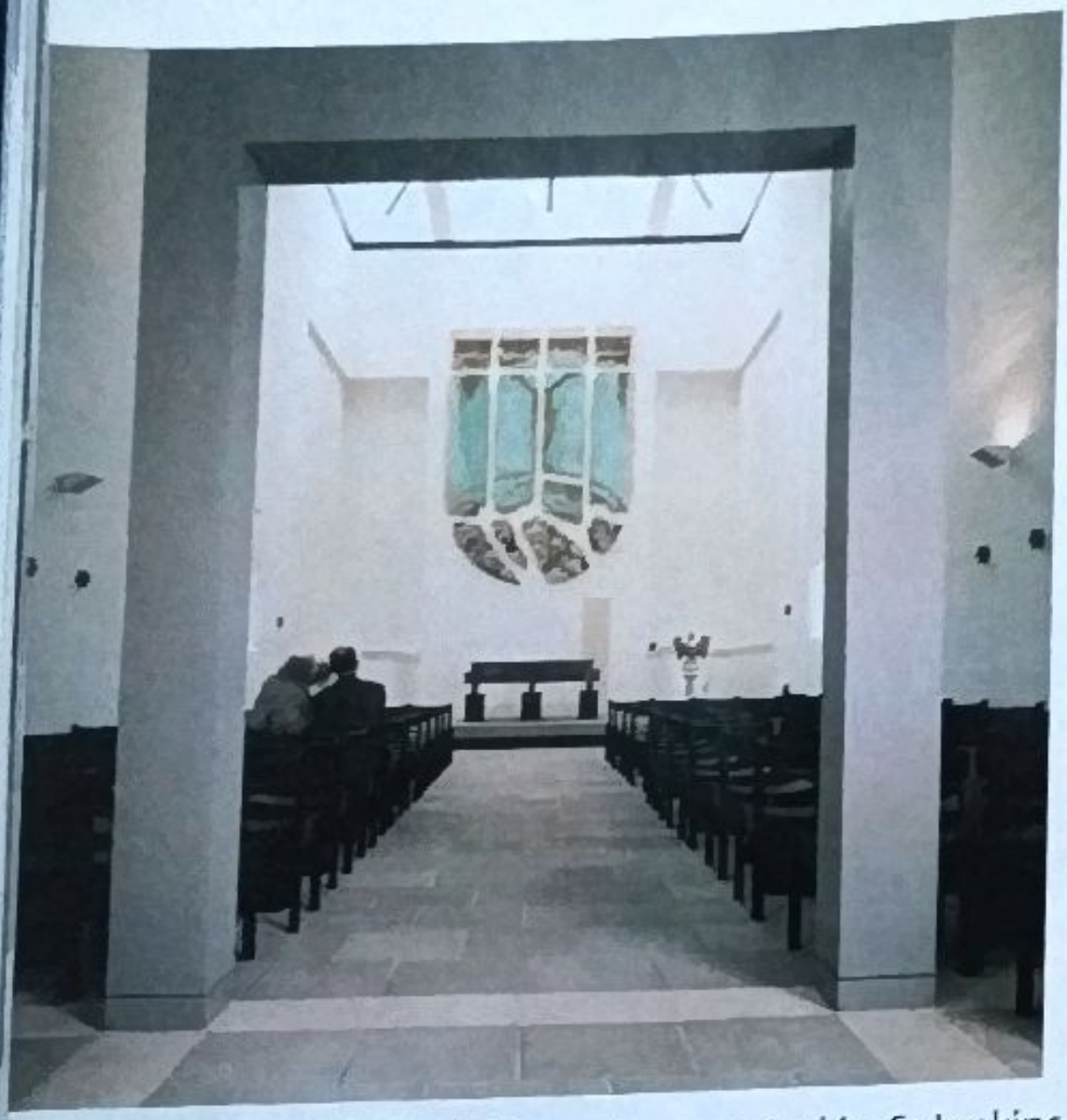


Robert Maxwell on the simple forms and complex allusions of a new church in north London. Photos: Padraig Boyle.

With 100 chairs in the nave, St Paul's is a small church but it has a large presence. It is thoroughly designed, down to the last detail, yet achieves a rare simplicity. It is as stylish as a designer restaurant, yet doesn't appear fancy. The design goes back to 1984 yet it doesn't look dated. That's quite an achievement.

The building represents nine years of effort by architects Peter Inskip & Peter Jenkins. The process of completing the design to the satisfaction of the vicar and the congregation was simple compared with the process of getting planning approval. Even though the church is a replacement for a Victorian gothic church destroyed by fire, there seems to have been resistance to its resurgence in a new form and to the simplicity and monumental scale of its replacement. Awkward that the church should want to come back at all, in a secular age. Why couldn't the architect do something vaguely vernacular or arts 'n' craftsy, something inoffensive and inconspicuous? Why did he have to be so bold? It's in a street of two-storey houses, doesn't it disrupt the scale terribly? In fact there are already two churches at the north end of Wightman Road, but they have been disrupting the residential scale long enough so that no one notices any more.

At a crucial moment in the standoff, Peter Jenkins persuaded the vicar to transport a couple of busloads of the congregation to the town hall, where the chair of the planning committee welcomed them, thinking they were about to protest at the unwelcome intrusion into their neighbourhood. When the moment



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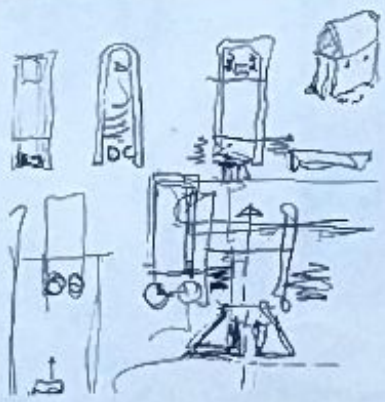
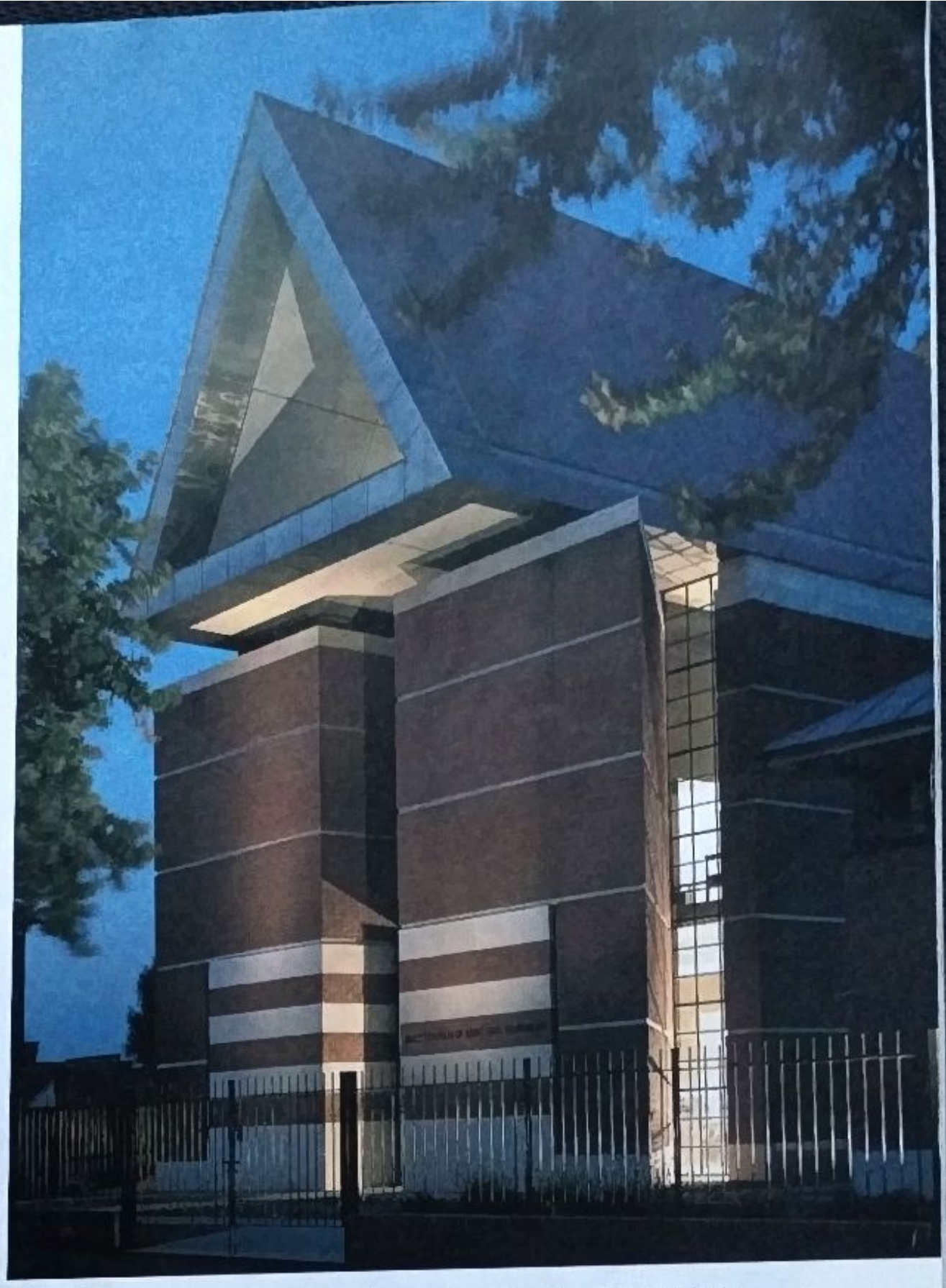




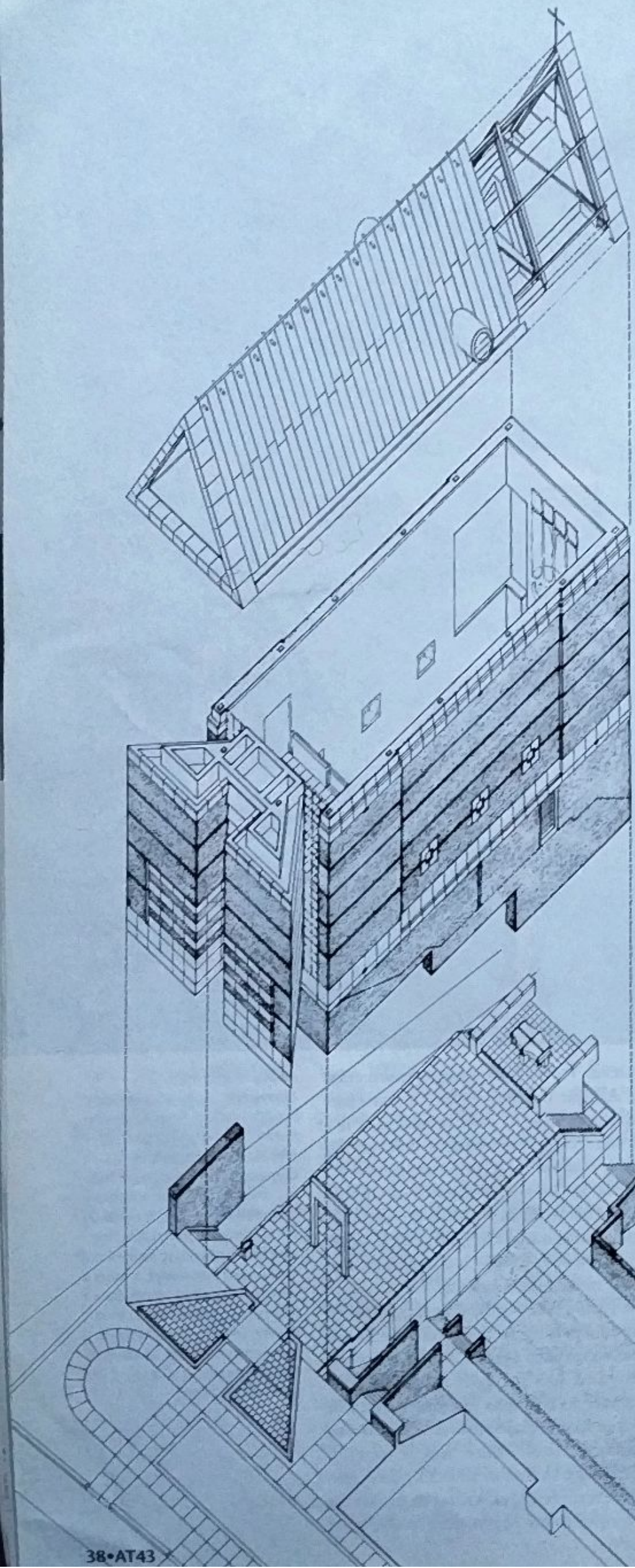
came to appeal to the gallery (a regular 'democratic' practice by Haringey council), the cries of support for the project caused the councillor to grow pale and opened the way to the planning approval.

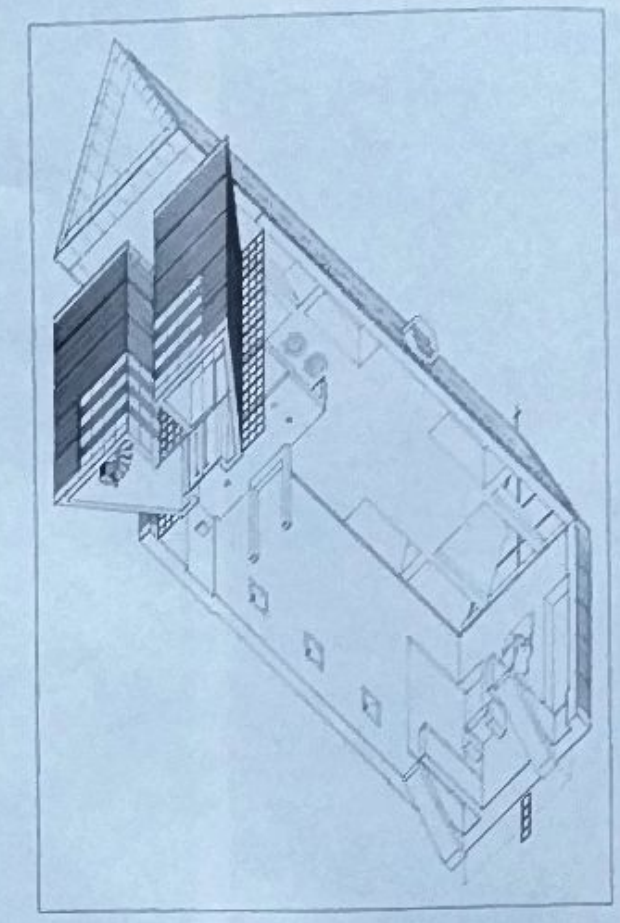
Now the congregation have their church and, whatever they may think about the architectural design, they know it as a church. It has a numinous presence, which, as with Ronchamp, is the product of a simple equation that Hannes Meyer did not think to write down: Architecture = Space x Light.

The form of the church is barnlike, somewhat in the manner of St Paul's Covent Garden. Inside, the pitched roof crowning the vertical space of the nave belongs to the tradition of church spaces: the roof responds to the nave. But on the outside it appears part of a self-sufficient equilateral volume floating in universal space. All the volumes define themselves with the precision of abstraction, with the edges stretching the surfaces taut, giving a feeling that we recognise as 'modern'. The debt to Rossi's memorial shrine at Segrate is clear. As at Segrate the triangle is both abstract and suggestive of a pediment, but here the scale is of inhabitation and that makes it provoking.

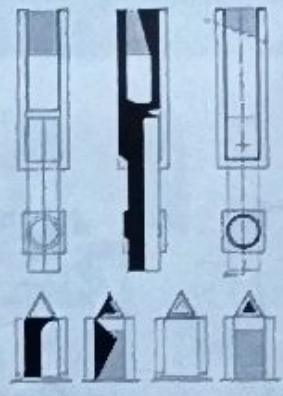
If St Paul's is recognisable as a church, it is not surprising to find that the architect has wanted to communicate purpose directly and has thought about church and temple as types, as examples that fall into place in a social sense. But this is not pop architecture. There was a specific archaic image in the architect's mind, the primitive temple represented in the terracotta model from Argos, where the roof

Above *Night view.*
Above left *St Paul's in its north London context, with Alexandra Palace beyond; initial concept sketches by Peter Jenkins.*
Opposite *Interior of nave looking towards the altar; sanctuary and altar detail. Reredos and altar are by sculptor Steven Cox; the reredos, in travertine stained with copper and iron oxides, depicts Christ on the cross above the fragmented map of the Roman empire, while in the altar three stone crosses resting on bases of breccia support a slab of Egyptian porphyry.*





Above *Up-view axonometric.*
Left *Axonometric showing threefold division between earthworks, walls and roof.*
Below *Temple of Hera, terracotta model from the excavation of the Heraeum at Argos, c800 BC; Aldo Rossi, monumental fountain, Segrate–Milan, 1965.*



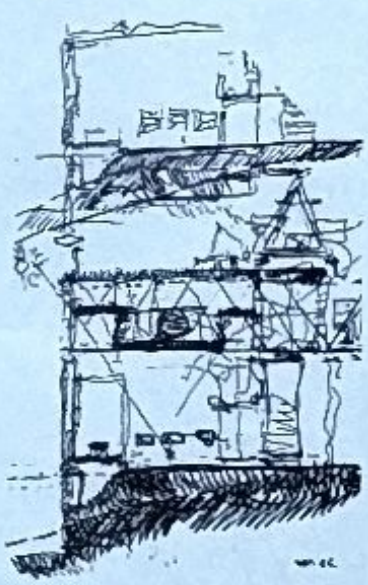
produced an equilateral triangle long before the pediment had reached its classical form. More recognisably, the pedimental triangle overhangs the entrance as the Roman portico did, but there are no columns of the kind that Robert Venturi would not hesitate to parade. Columns have disappeared into angled volumes that spread the frontal plane and allow access to the bell tower and organ loft. The spread of these volumes shields the west end from direct light and obscures the view of the houses opposite. The result admittedly is to mystify the primary forms and create a somewhat disquieting conflict, but the conflict worries the critic not the parishioners.

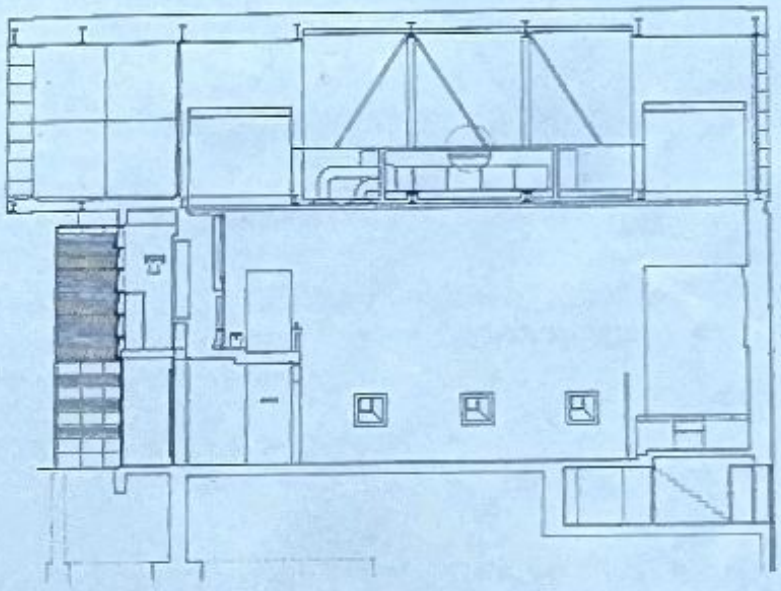
The image of 'church' results not from direct reference but from a generalised loftiness. It is also true that the view of the east end above roofs from lower down Cavendish Road says 'church' in a more

familiar, almost medieval way. And although all the parts are designed in the same idiom, we have no difficulty in reading 'church' and 'vicarage'; each part takes up its appropriate value.

If the outside is strangely complex, the inside is appealing in its simplicity. Light percolates through the glazed gables but is diffused by an inner triangle. Light and space work together. The eye is inexorably drawn upward. On either side of the nave a series of three small square windows allows sun to enter in an almost domestic way, addressing the individual rather than the group. The reredos by sculptor Steven Cox helps the eye in its upward ascent. The altar, also by Cox, is an imposing combination of abstract and figurative, a synthesis in which we recognise the cross as the Jungian archetype par excellence. Everything is designed in a minimalist mode, producing an impressive stillness.

Is this rationalist architecture? I think so. It has been pondered, worked upon to distil an emotion, but only after reason has defined the parameters. It works with modern know-how as well as real stone. The tall walls hold together and are stabilised by the steel structure of the roof, braced in both directions. Warmed air descends, like the Holy Spirit, through the architect's careful mediation: grace within a tight budget. Yes, this is architecture which tries to combine traditional meanings with the crispness of modernity. It works the abstract and the representational into a tight embrace. And, strangely, it also illustrates Hannes Meyer's encomium: Architecture = Function x Economy.

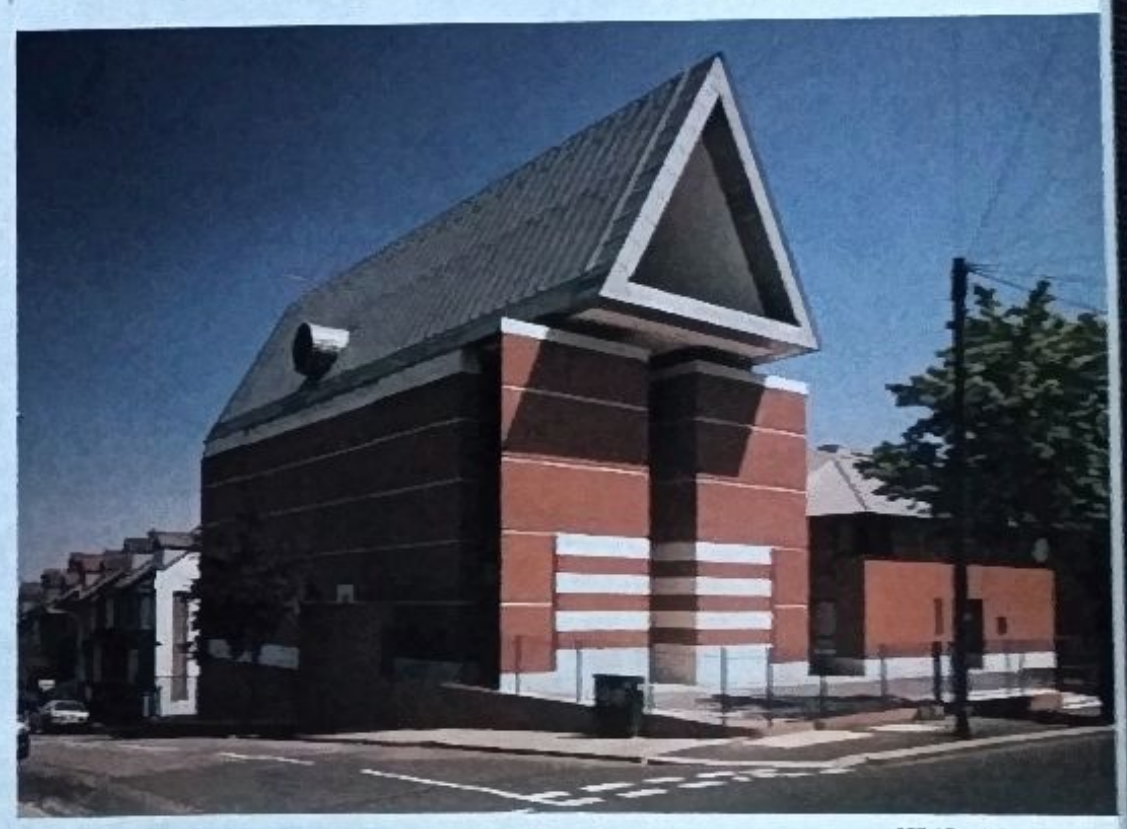




Left *Sketch and final long section.*

Project team
Architect: Peter Inskip + Peter Jenkins; design team: Peter Jenkins, Terry McCarthy, Honor Thompson, Narendra Gajjar, Tim Godsmark, Bob Edgar; structural engineer: Ove Arup & Partners; mechanical engineer: James Briggs, qs: David Langdon & Everest; contractor: JJ McGinley.

Selected subcontractors and suppliers
Facing bricks: Blockleys; commons: London Brick Company; cast stone: Heritage Stone, Bison Concrete Products; roof steel: Watford Welding; roof: Sogem/Metizinc; heating: Astro; steel windows: NSB Casements; plasterboard: British Gypsum; ash-faced ply: William & Eden; railings etc: Singer & James; rw goods: Glynwed Foundries; lighting: Concord, Erco; insulation: Gyproc; drainage: Hepworth Building Products; mortars: RMC; paviors: Stowells; spiral stair: Albion; glazing: Pilkington Glass; masonry fixings: Harris & Edgar.



Robert Maxwell was dean of architecture at Princeton University from 1982 to 1989. His article 'After Utopia: rationalism from Ledoux to Ando' was published in AT41.